

song of the damned

1.

when gates freeze, the first thing born
is the lock of a border guard;
a scream in the shape of a dancer
crawls from the carriage. listen, breathe
it's home again, the stink of a spire
fish sweat and car clog and bread
singing lady come and dance, come and drown
step in this harbour like a hypothalamus
adrift, and i can't sit still
til a tilted ship tips its broken nose
to the wind at an angle of forty-five
as rot men stalk the fortress quay
after shuffling, a shy bright whisper:
city indefensible
you fill my pockets with a brace of stones
cast me like an empty net
and fall to every empire like a sore
i carry a plastic fork, a ceiling
dealing a spill for the cats that creak
in the groping throat the bosporous pulses
licks at the city, dancing animal,
scream in the shape of a spire
cast in the die of a megaphone crier
what do you believe, pray
what do you believe?
i can leave

because i don't know how to dance
i am walking
in a sleep between tidesheets
in a straight line
because i don't know how to dance
i can't sit still
treading earth and breathing fire
because i don't know how to dance
i grow dizzy

witness, there were angels once
a damaged cloud of ash in flight
a conversation broken into beggars' cups

a hustler's dialect, a curse, delight
in this riot there are only beasts
we bump against each other and bear teeth
but in the eye of the taksim tempest
your garden, mevlana, turns twelve million faces
into ghosts.

2.

a catcall, a shipwrecked picnic
the only head in sight of steel
some dead captain leering on a stick
a small boy ditched and pointing to the naval base
earthshaker, steeplechase, wheelbarrow, danger sign
barbed wire is a brotherhood in pine
my friend, i would turn you to life
like a backward basilisk had i the way
but times are such that yes the snake
and homunculous twist, and winter
breaks over the night like an egg.
greek cemetery, turkish island, women's madhouse
devil's hand. another locked gate
twist my ankle hide my face
as the rain cracks at fishermen
like a disease, hides in the eaves
and coats the yellow hell on the horizon
in a magnifying haze
i come for silence and find a darkness
she shows me the grave
and i jump the wall and run

if you're young, it's because you don't work
except for love, have no fear except reverse
have no will except to live
where the strength is air and water
the release
is a wave. unrepentant, god and heavenless
i come empty headed to a wedding dance, a grave

if you're old it's because you don't listen
or you long for this world of noise
will you let down your guard and speak
will you let down your eyes to the perilous street
you shall not want a shepherd yet

not in a city of feet and crawling
not in a town of smoke
i walk where the dark has a voice, and leaving
follow your cloak through the covered market
clutch at the hem of the safety of women
scarved like a vaulted ceiling
unbelieving
but in the shade of an olive tree
i am beckoned to the feast. bread and honey
in the tongue of wonder
bread and an aching back
in the lap of danger
bread and a parting orange
it's gold, gold, it says come.

3.

it will not break the ascetic's claim
to sleep with the dead in their vault of stories
on a bed of stones to lose the fire
from making love with the sea. i'm not philosophy,
i closed my eyes. anyway its no ocean, only
the sound of civilisation
in imminent ruin, the perfect tune
of brakes on a verge and a commons
a summons
the drum of the gravel that slides out beneath
the wheels of a semi, a backrest for breakfast
the flat bread of wives, rosemary and çay
three languages no eggs
already the things i am leaving behind

because i don't know how to breathe
i smoke like a turk
angel ash and floating dirt
i never learn
because i don't know how to breathe
when it's this cold
i catch my life
because i don't know how to breathe
i can't stop laughing

it rains and i play tavla with the guards
of the basilica. i wrote five hundred poems,

he says, and writes 500
in the margin of the football stats
taking seeds in the other fist to split
like a blinded bird. i learn new words
for rain, for let me lose slowly,
for winter's a protectorate
of small forgotten gods
they spring like mushrooms from the ruins
hushed and stoke the stoves and laugh
singing twist my name to your tongue, friend
and i'll rest anywhere. with a wink
i have no wish to argue, i can only
press my temple to the pine
that bears the absence of the temple
it's the temple
it's the black peat of a prayer
stay there

4.

when the milk turns
stop the truck in soma, i'll walk
these fields the rising breath
of sleeping people, part the rushes
trample on the threshers making
paper from their bones, time
pressing out their shadows with a pestle
that crushes awake like a white dawn:
yes. life is elsewhere
give it away
turn your cemetery over to the chooks
let cotton fleece gutters and lay down your books
go to the river and turn your skin to gold
you'll die a rich man yet

in the pines, in the pines
in the fat square boil of a factory
godspored on the mountain's back
in the stripes of a smokestack
you learn to repeat the megaphone warning
sleep-work-pray and no escape
for the child psychologist
child psychologist
what will you make of this

because i don't know how to pray
like the children who kiss and run
i am in trouble
i don't mind
because i don't know how to pray
i sit still
my knees go numb with it
because i don't know how to pray
it's cold here

there are articles and acts and leaps of faith
cycles and circles and circuses
how can you fill my head with air and light
put rocks in my pockets and stand there?
a child, a goatherd, or a bruised lip
would sail to morning in these boots
teaspoon oars and a black flag flying
hell is a highway, weathered and this
is a turkish titanic in miniature:
minaret, metaphor, signature.

6.

i fled a hundred barbers, a tower of handshakes
the glare of a dirtbike pushed between the pines
these trodden plains, the lap land catching
crumbs of a broken biscuit, damned
standing stones to the dead, i stare
from windows at a scratched out city
blinded like a passenger of kings
if the sky closes in
i can walk from here
infidel, pagan, worshipper of dirt
but the devil rides shotgun
clicking counters with a gentle hail, friend
you are losing

because i don't know how to sing
i have no name
bring no gift to the grave
give no sign
because i don't know how to sing
i talk with my hands
it's a living

because i don't know how to sing
i am given to whistling

there are few true things
goats will roam and cats will steal
and children chase the birds
when the roof caves in
there is air and water
the strength of the shapeless
how can i love you, dirt
you are a slow death
there are scant truths
it's too cold to sleep out now
the tower is falling
and i catch myself looking sidelong
at the office blocks for cracks
it's a matter of resistance
building barricades to earthquakes
hosing out the flood
blocking our ears and eyes to the road
and we push each story in a paper cone
parchment, pistachio, prayer

7.

please, it is an orange
i never learned to say no
take my hand, hold these stones, say
the ninety-nine names: the strings
of the violin, the trinket, the ney and the beat
the beat of doublesocked feet
on the ruinous road to the east, seek
this is gold, this juice
on a thumb turned frozen to the road
i come for a friend and find a teacher
ribbonless blessed by the outcastness
breathing dream in the golden steppes
it's no ocean
but the body of the mountain
is a weight in my throat
and i whisper to you from my window, anatolia
and the shepherds stare
stay there

because i don't know how to speak
i forget there is no god
i forget this nothing
universe is a conversation
because i don't know how to speak
it's a flute
that plays itself to life
because i don't know how to speak
i am given to listening

when i let down my anchor
the city sinks the boat of me
where a stretch of coral concrete
starfishes to the winds of prayer
a desert's bare hand
takes me in and it's built in
like the way of the stranger
pastel development, photograph patchwork
snow in the gutters and beyond this,
somewhere, civilisation
dug from the fields by improbable pillagers
it raises a whisper
between the glass lines:
remember you must die
and water
a cold garden rising in the heart
a red carnation
the soft light of damnation

8.

a citrus instrument, the tang of strings at latitude
a bed of verdant spines
the smell of apples is an antidote
to vacant lots and brown air scarred with burning
i am an amateur rapper, he tells me
waving pursed fingers over his palm in the sign of writing
but he works all day in his mother's restaurant
and breaks the atheist to a minor greek

a citrus instrument, high heaps of gold on a ponycart
simit tower on a kid's head, yelling under lace
worship only allah, hang your banners from the neon dervish
crack the ice and catch them staring

give us food and rain and dancing, give us nothing
anyway we will forget and keep on digging til the roof caves in

a citrus instrument, a marketful of paces
save your graces for the rain and your prayers for cabbages
piled like purple fists in the dirt, impotent knots of knuckle and vein
i would sooner gnaw at a driftwood onion
than fight for bread in a plastic bag
but times are such that the mountain of garbage
walks to mohammed's door like the poet's infidel
and we are afraid

a citrus instrument, worshipper of fire, how can i say
i have faith in colour and light? in a packet of smokes
and a kitchen table, a knock at the mountain's door
and a thumb turned frozen to the road?
there is no church but sugar and no word for
god but silence and no silence in the city of the faithful
how can i say this, i have little words
the gift is the giving the breath is the living
and we keep talking

9.

witness, there were destinations
cast in a fortune's turn
what you believe doesn't matter
in a house of glass
the artifice dancers
bow to the cameras
fall to their knees
sometimes the dirt floor freezes
but under the leather clockwork of feet
the burn of a circle in the earth
is the wedding
is the bright hole of a tomb
speak soon

in your doorway, prayer, the bodyguards come
surgeons of faith with their feet tied
in plastic bags, come to dissect the friend
i run between their cameras, citrus-seeking
there is too much god and not enough dancing
too many portents and not enough singing

too much smoke and not enough breathing
and in the eye of the atom, nothing
only your garden, mevlana, spinning

turning

the stones in my pocket to oranges
i come for a seed, i am given a score
give me your hand, breathe, i can leave
if i'm counting the cards
the smokepacket lung scars, the stars
and the whirling dice at last:
step, belief step
step, belief step
catching myself from falling and falling
and walking impossibly home, in a circle
to the dead
to the wedding
to the end
oh it's nothing
sit still there are a few true things
left to sing about